

This story was submitted to the People's War site by RICHARD FIELD on behalf of KEITH WHITFIELD and has been added to the site with his permission. The author fully understands the site's terms and conditions.

By Keith Whitfield  
(as related to Richard Field)

To a young lad of knocking 10 years, the first six months of the war meant apprehension, excitement, and unlimited adventure.

I remember listening to Mr Chamberlain on the Sunday, September 3, 1939 on the radio of our home in Bishop Monkton, telling us that we were at war. After dinner, my father took our photograph in the garden.

In the village, appointments were made and levels of command were established. Everything was taken seriously, as indeed it was. The ARP personnel were on patrol every night. The blackout was very dense on a cloudy and black night, although such were few and far between, and we quickly got used to the darkness, with stars and moonlight. There were Firewatchers at Freedom Mill. Just outside the Mill gates, a roadblock had been built of timbers, sand bags and rubble. A local fire brigade was formed with their H.Q. in the Mechanics Institute, their equipment, stirrup pumps etc was kept there along with a small wooden trolley carrying a donkey engine to drive a larger pump. Appropriate sumps were sunk into the bed of the beck at intervals to accommodate the pump head, and the men practised every Sunday.

The year 1940 brought evacuees from Sussex who were well spread around the village houses. They schooled in the WI Hall and I remember the church choir stalls were full! The village was full of children of differing ages throughout the war, and we had great fun and games in the fields, and on the farms of kindly farmers. Little damage was done and we helped to collect crops, from potatoes, to hay and corn. A youth club was formed by the WI, which my mother ran for the duration with our signature tune being 'There'll always be an England'. It both entertained us and kept us off the streets. We had some very hard winters during the war, 1941 and 1944 in particular. We spent practically every winter ice skating on the mill dam, or Hilly Fields. Sledging in brilliant moonlight. We were out every night, or so it seemed.

The radio was our lifeline. We all listened avidly to news bulletins throughout the war, supplemented on occasion by a trip to the cinema and a newsreel. It was like a geography lesson to me. I learned worldly places, 'Pripet Marshes, Brest Litovsk, Quatarra Depression'. It was almost all bad news at first but I do not think that any of us every thought that we were not going to win! I can remember sitting on the Mechanics bridge when someone ran out of Hall farm shouting, 'They've sunk the Hood'. It was May 1941.

When the tide began to turn in 1943, we had all learned a lot about life and hardship; although living in the country as we did we had access to a lot that the townies could not get. We were never short of a rabbit, a pigeon, or may be the odd pheasant. We used to eat water hen eggs. There were fish in the river, and some good trout to tickle by torchlight in the beck! Monkton's war started to hot up. We had troops from Ripon down the Boroughbridge road on the bridging site near Holbeck, some Royal Signals living in Riseley Hall at Wormald Green. Ripon itself had always been a military base.

There were aircraft constantly overhead from the many bases in the Vale of York. As well as British, there were Poles, Czechs, French, Americans, Australians, New Zealanders, and many Canadians, in fact the latter were the majority from 1943 onward. Some flew high and some flew very, very, low! As the war progressed the aircraft got bigger and faster, and their numbers grew.

We also had the enemy overhead too, although nothing was dropped on Monkton. We could see and hear them bombing Sheffield, Middlesbrough and Teeside. They had a go at the airbases, including Dishforth, early in the war, and then again towards the end. There were 'intruders' over on many nights: you could hear them. They also passed overhead to bomb many of the northern towns. A string of bombs destroyed Masham gasworks and hit the brewery! There was also a string of stray bombs near the bridge at Ripley.

The nearest scrape with death we had was at 23.29 hours on Saturday, April 15, 1944 when seven young men died in their Halifax bomber, alongside the Ripon road approximately 500 yards from the new sports field. I can still smell it!

A War Committee formed early months of the war largely of WI members, played a marvellous part in village entertainment by organising a regular Saturday night dance in the old Hall. With both my grandmother and mother both involved, I was able to sneak in to these without too much trouble.

With three pubs in full swing in those days the dances could be hectic after closing time! However, there was rarely trouble inside the Hall as the hardy W.I. ladies always confiscated any bottles as people entered! Monkton dances were always popular and well patronised by the local youth, soldiers from Ripon, and aircrew from Dishforth. The latter would arrive with a lorry usually carrying four to five crews: they always came together. Some were regular for a while, and some we never saw again.

I remember the massive bonfire we built and all the other celebrations for victory in 1945, but I also remember standing in the orchard on the evening of the day after the war ended. It was totally silent and odd! We learned later that all aircraft had been grounded.

I still remember the three village men who did not return. I knew them all.

WW2 People's War is an online archive of wartime memories contributed by members of the public and gathered by the BBC. The archive can be found at [bbc.co.uk/ww2peopleswar](http://bbc.co.uk/ww2peopleswar)